

# The Bahama's **Tiger Beach**

Text and photos  
by Matthew Meier

— *Lemons & Tigers & Bulls, Oh My!*







Three female tiger sharks approaching the feeder (above); A great hammerhead shark swimming over the sandy bottom with sun rays overhead (top right); A great hammerhead shark and a tiger shark swimming past the feeder (previous page)

**Standing on the swim step, trying to time my entry with a gap in the dozen or more lemon sharks circling directly below me was a bit daunting the first go around. Of course, the sharks knew this routine well and skillfully avoided my clumsy splash into the water. The reward waiting beneath the surface was an assemblage of sharks that cannot be collectively encountered anywhere else in the world.**

As I settled onto the sandy bottom, a mere 20ft below the boat, a curious and very pregnant 13ft tiger shark came over to

welcome me to her neighborhood. Soon a second, equally massive tiger shark appeared, then three bull sharks, several Caribbean reef sharks and a few lemon sharks followed along for good measure.

Finally, hovering only a few inches above the sand, a beautifully agile great hammerhead shark drifted past. It was just ten minutes into my checkout dive at Tiger Beach and I had already had close encounters with every shark I had hoped to see on this trip! My heart was pumping, my head was spinning and I could not even imagine how much more thrilling these encounters would become once the divemaster brought fish into the water and we began a proper tiger shark-feeding dive.

### Getting there

Tiger Beach is a shallow sand flat located roughly 26 nautical miles from

West End, Grand Bahama, and about equal distance from Fort Lauderdale in the US state of Florida. Divers have been interacting with sharks here for years, getting to this famous site via boats departing from both the United States and Grand Bahama Island. Day trips as well as multi-day liveaboard excursions are available from a range of operators, offering varying dive methods and creature comforts for their guests on board.

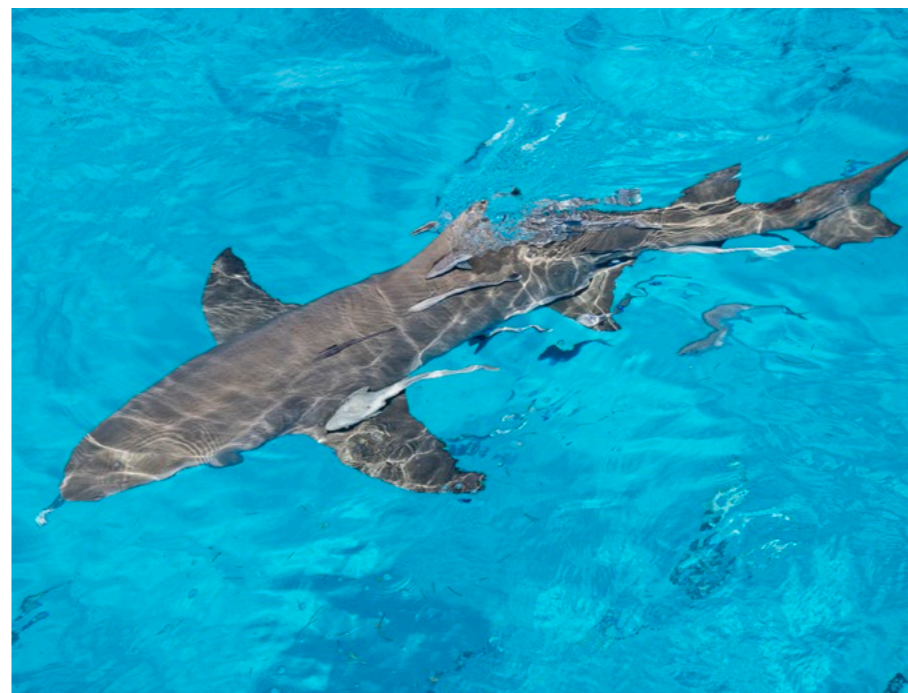
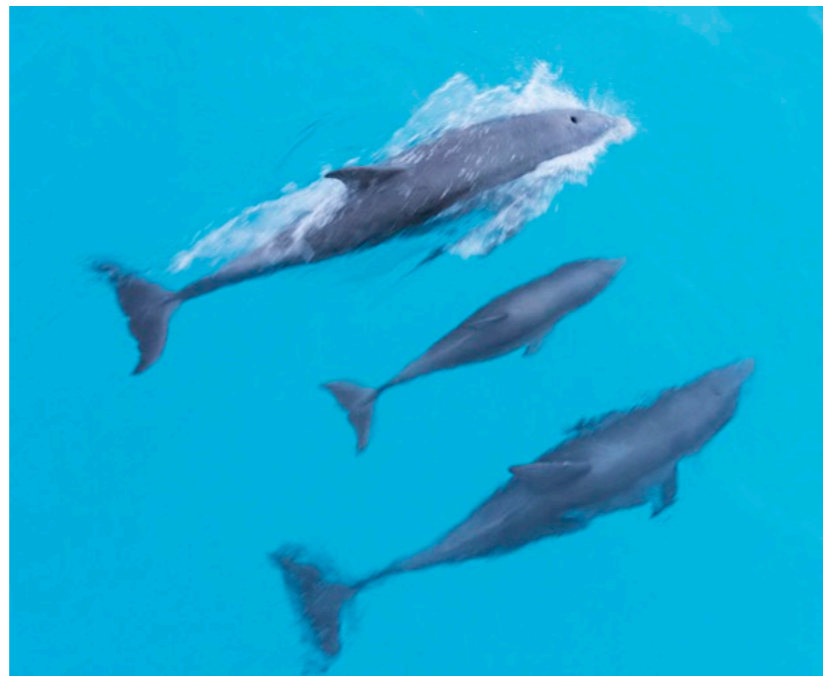
The *Bahamas Master* is the newest liveaboard in these waters and she began operations in February 2018, having previously catered to guests in the Pacific Ocean around Malpelo. Boats departing the United States have to cross the Gulf Stream, which can make for a rough journey, while boats from Grand Bahama depart from the towns of either West End or Freeport. The

## Tiger Beach



A female tiger shark turning towards the camera





Aerial view of the *Bahamas Master* live-aboard anchored at Tiger Beach (above) with divers and tiger sharks visible in the water and several lemon sharks swimming on the surface off her stern (top right); A mother, baby and escort Atlantic bottlenose dolphins swimming alongside the boat in pre-dawn light (right); Looking down on a lemon shark swimming at the water's surface (far right)

passage out of Freeport Harbour can only be made at high tide and thus dictates when the captain is able to begin the 93-mile trek to Tiger Beach. Several daily flights are available from both Fort Lauderdale and Miami, in the United States, to the Grand Bahama International Airport in Freeport. A ferry service is also available for those that prefer not to fly.

**How it works**



My seven-day liveaboard adventure provided nearly unlimited bottom time and unfettered access to the

sharks. For the majority of our trip, our divemasters rotated in and out of the water throughout the day, allowing the guests to submerge at their discretion. We visited dive sites such as Classic Tiger and The Pool, with depths of


approximately 30ft and 18 ft respectively. I averaged 90 to 120 minutes per tank and spent up to five hours a day underwater. At such shallow depths, there is not much need for a surface interval between dives, and I would often come up for more air, a quick restroom break, a drink of water and a snack before dropping right back into the water. When immersed with the sharks,

divers were over-weighted, so we sank and stayed on the bottom. Traversing from the downline off the back of the boat to the feeding location was done by walking backwards in fins across the sand, as the divemasters did not want us swimming up in the water column.

Each diver was outfitted, head to toe, in dark-colored wetsuits to help eliminate any confusion a bright, contrasting color might create for the sharks, and we were given an extensive safety briefing before our first dive. For our own protection,

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each diver was given a "patent-pending" 3ft section of PVC pipe to fend off the sharks. The pipe was meant to be placed vertically in the sand in front of an approaching shark so that the shark would change direction and not swim head on into a diver. Those of us with large dome ports

divemaster/feeder went down with a small, steel crate of fish to attract the sharks, and on occasion, would offer a tiger or great hammerhead shark a hand-fed snack. No fish was intentionally given to the bull or lemon sharks, nor the nurse or Caribbean reef sharks, which also made appearances.

on our underwater housings were instructed to redirect the sharks with our cameras, allowing for countless face-to-face meetings just prior to each shark being turned aside or guided up and over our heads.

**Baited dives**  
These dives were so-called baited or feeding dives, in which the

On several stretches throughout the trip, we were able to observe all six shark species on a particular dive. Still, I was only ever able to capture five of the species in a single photo. Divers formed two lines upcurrent in a "V" formation, kneeling on either side of the feeder, allowing the sharks to follow the smell of fish and essentially swim down a runway past the divers to the bait.

Enough space was left to either side of the feeder to permit the sharks to pass between the divemaster and the first guest before circling around for another stroll down the runway. The gap between each subsequent diver was kept at an arm's length to deter the sharks from swimming directly between the divers. When a shark followed this path, it was fairly easy to keep track of them, but there was almost always another shark coming from a different direction, requiring divers



Three female tiger sharks being redirected by the feeder (above); A pair of female tiger sharks approaching the feeder and bumping directly into my camera lens (left); A female tiger shark swimming up in the water column past the feeder, while three additional tiger sharks and a great hammerhead shark circle in the background (top left)





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A pregnant tiger shark being hand fed (above); Profile of female tiger shark with three small fish swimming by its nose (left); Fisheye view of a female tiger shark being put into a state of tonic immobility by the feeder (right)

approached, to help give everyone an extra set of eyes on the backs of their heads. The intensity I thought I had experienced on my checkout dive was nothing compared to when six or eight tiger sharks were circling the group, and the top priority shifted from taking pictures to simply

keeping the camera in-between myself and the nearest shark.

I was surprised at how sore I was at the end of the day from all of the twisting, turning, kneeling and

lunging, which was required to keep an eye on my surroundings and maintain body position on the sand. Not to mention the mental exhaustion such an adrenalin-filled activity inflicts on one's body.

Special attention must be given to the tiger and great hammerhead sharks, while remembering not to ignore the bull or lemon sharks. All can be inquisitive and will suddenly appear behind you if you are not paying attention. The bull sharks especially can be quite brazen as they venture out from beneath the boat while divers are walking to or from the feeding location. Yet, as soon

as eye contact was made, they quickly turned to swim back to the safety of the shadows.

### Topside

When not in the water, guests were able to relax in the comfy beanbag chairs in the lounge, work on their tans on the back deck or even observe the shark action from up above, while sharing stories from their latest shark encounter—whether that was watching the circling lemon sharks, swimming near the surface, or looking down at the dark shadows of the tiger sharks strutting their way down the runway.







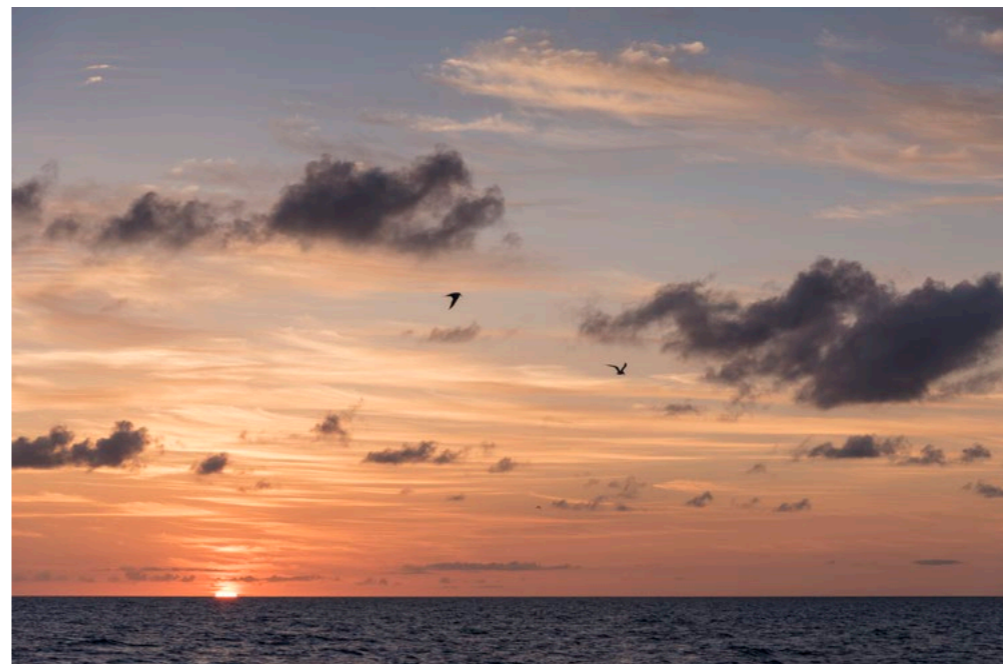
A pregnant tiger shark is redirected by the feeder, while two more tiger sharks swim in the background (left); colorful sunrise silhouettes low clouds on the horizon over the Atlantic Ocean (below)

## Tiger Beach

couple of lucky photos in spite of being bounced around while laying on the swim step.

### Known shark groups and individuals

The crew characterized the tiger sharks that visited us each day as belonging to one of three groups. The "Supermodels" were the most comfortable with the divers and would loop down the runway time and again, even when they were the only sharks in the area. The "Players" were familiar with the routine but would more readily saunter down the runway only if other sharks were present. "Wild sharks" were



Full meals were served three times daily, with multiple menu items offered to accommodate varying tastes and food restriction requirements. Snacks, sodas, juice, hot coffee or tea and water were always available, as were beer and wine after your dive day was finished.

### Photography

I spent a lot of my time in-between dives in the camera room swapping out batteries and memory cards throughout the day. The rapid-fire action down below meant that I shot a ton of photos and quickly wore out my strobe's battery packs. The extensive access to the sharks also allowed me to test several lenses for differing perspectives and shot variety.

We enjoyed lovely sunrises and sunsets from the top deck and an incredible view of the night sky, with little to no light pollution so



far out at sea. Several members of our group screened a different selection from the *Jaws* movies lineup each night, and there was always some sort of shark-related show on the television.

On two of the calmer nights

while anchored at Tiger Beach, the divemasters attracted lemon sharks to the back deck for photo opportunities. Conditions were not ideal for sunset split shots, as we had sizeable waves at times, but I managed a

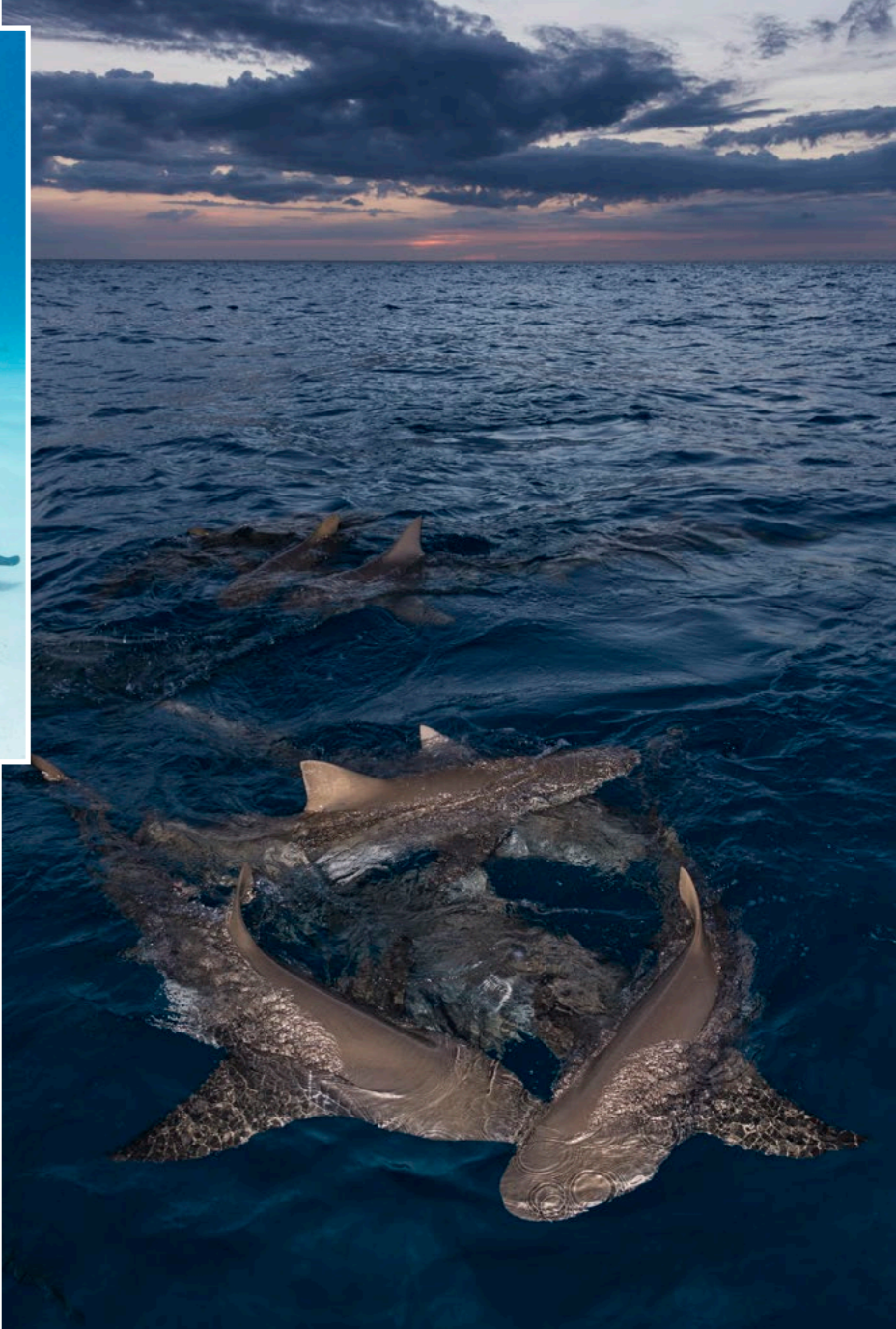


Great hammerhead shark approaches the feeder while a tiger shark sniffs the bait box (above); Nurse shark (left)





Over-under view of a pair of lemon sharks swimming at the water's surface at sunset (left); A great hammerhead shark swimming over the sandy bottom (above); Several lemon sharks swimming at the water's surface at sunset (right); A bull shark swimming over the shallow sandy bottom (below)



skittish and would show up on occasion, attracted by the fish, but they stayed on the periphery and infrequently ventured towards the feeder, rarely getting close to the divers.

Many of the Supermodels and Players have been regular visitors over the years and are known by such names as Emma, Tequila, Maui, Maria, Frankie, Freckles and Jitterbug. In total, we saw 10 to 12 different tiger sharks during our expedition, including a couple of unnamed, new faces and one 8ft juvenile that made two brave, relatively close passes on our very last dive.

Nearly all of the tiger sharks that frequent this area are female. A large number of the ones we encountered were pregnant, and the sharks can be found here almost year round. For the

past three years, a great hammerhead shark named "Patches" has taken up residency and another, even larger hammerhead named "Queen" has made frequent appearances.

Unfortunately, we were not lucky enough to see her on our visit.

Patches was the first great hammerhead to migrate over from Bimini and not return. At 12 to 14ft long, she is an

imposing figure, with numerous spots on her underside, for which she is named. The spots darken in color throughout the year as the melatonin in Patches' skin tans from the reflected sunlight off the sand.



### Location and conditions

Tiger Beach sits just east of the deep water Gulf Stream and offers little protection from the wind and waves that Mother Nature can generate over the open ocean. Storms and winds from the west can stir up the sand in the shallows with strong waves and swell, reducing visibility and ultimately creating conditions that are not conducive to diving with the sharks.

On those nights when the wind was churning up the sea, our

captain ventured farther east of Tiger Beach to anchor and find calmer sleeping conditions. For part of two days during our trip, we were unable to dive with the sharks, but this did not always keep us out of the water entirely. It actually provided us with the opportunity to expand our diving diversity with some reef dives.

There are beautiful, pristine coral reefs, with deep ledges and drop-offs, only a few minutes to the west of Tiger Beach, where the visibility is much less affected by the waves. As long as it is safe to enter and exit off the back of the boat, it is possible to dive the reefs and enjoy a colorful break from the sandy desert.





Diver with sponges and sea fans on reef just west of Tiger Beach (top left); Several fish above a reef garden of sponges and sea fans (top right); Large sponges and sea fans decorate a pristine coral reef (right); Caribbean reef shark swimming above sea fans on reef (left)

There are vibrant sea fans, large barrel sponges, beautiful hard and soft corals, several species of grouper, crabs, lobster, schooling reef fish and of course sharks. These were some of the healthiest reefs I have seen in the Bahamas, or even the Caribbean for that matter.

On occasion, the tiger sharks will follow the boat away from the beach, where you can encounter them in a free-swimming environment. Caribbean reef sharks, nurse sharks, bull sharks and lemon sharks can also be found swimming over the reef.

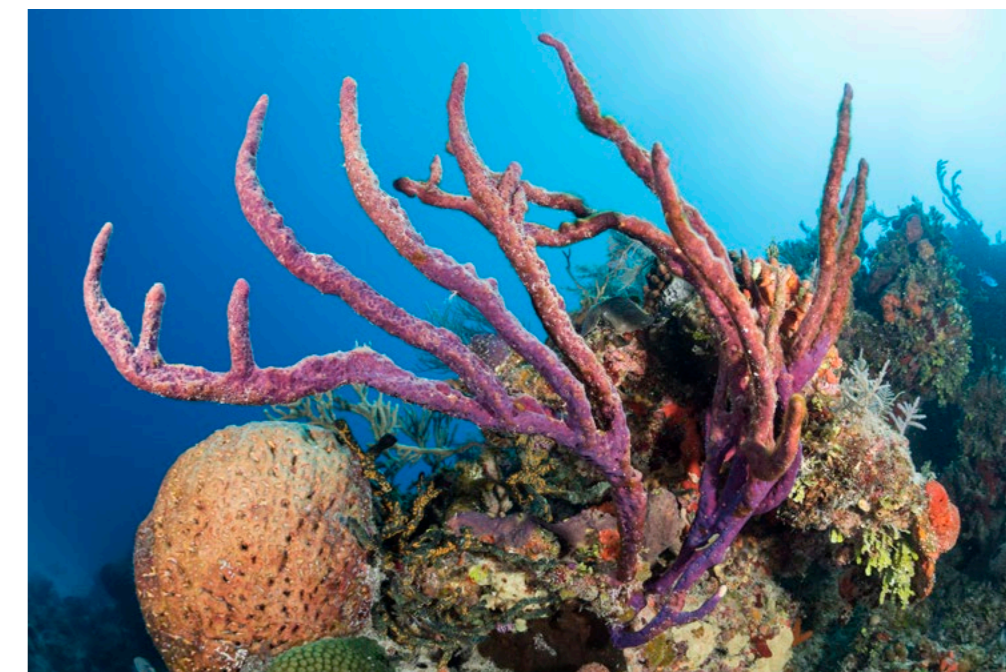
**More dives with sharks**

The last two days of our trip were near polar opposites as far as wind, waves, visibility and action. We started the second to last day with two dives on the nearby reefs in hopes that the wind

would subside and conditions would improve underwater for the sharks.

By midday, we were anchored back at The Pool but the swell was still stirring up the sand and we consequently waited a few more hours before reassessing the situation. The decision was made later in the day to reestablish shark feeding activities and I hopped in the water for most of the next three hours.

The first two hours proved to be an exercise in Zen breathing techniques, as



there was little to do at times but stare at the sand. We had a few Caribbean reef sharks, bull sharks and lemon sharks slowly circle the group, but their presence was often short-lived.

By the time I exited the water to refill





Pair of pregnant, female tiger sharks (above); Pair of Caribbean reef sharks swim over the sandy bottom (bottom left); Lemon shark resting on the sand with accompanying remora (top left)

my tank, our group had dwindled to the point that there was only one other person still in the water with the feeder. After my airfill, I stayed near the surface at the back of the boat in an attempt to photograph the lemon sharks up in the water column before seeing our first tiger shark of the day approach down below.

Freckles had showed up to pay us a visit and the three of us remaining in the water had her all to ourselves for the next 40 minutes. It was an incredibly peaceful afternoon that made us all appreciate the sheer number of sharks we had been diving with throughout the week.

Our last morning started a bit earlier than previous days, in hopes we could

attract more of the sharks to our position and to give ourselves more time in the water before heading for home. The sun was shining, the wind had calmed, and everyone was excited for our last opportunity to get in the water with the sharks.

The early wake-up call seemed to pay off as we had six to eight tiger sharks (plus Patches), swimming amongst us for the next four hours, with beautiful light rays streaming in from above and clear, blue water all around. It was a magical, storybook ending to an extraordinarily memorable experience. I highly recommend this bucket-list, trip-of-a-lifetime-type adventure for anyone interested in a heart-pumping, intimate

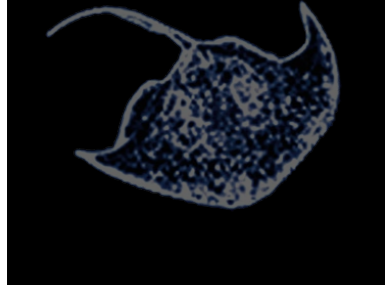
encounter with these magnificent apex predators. ■

*The author would like to thank Master Liveaboards and the crew of the Bahamas Master ([masterliveaboards.com/bahamas](http://masterliveaboards.com/bahamas)) for hosting this expedition as well as Scubapro ([scubapro.com](http://scubapro.com)) and Blue Abyss Photo ([blueabyssphoto.com](http://blueabyssphoto.com)) for their assistance with underwater dive and photo gear.*

*Matthew Meier is a professional underwater photographer and travel writer based in San Diego, California. To see more of his work and to order photo prints, please visit: [matthewmeierphoto.com](http://matthewmeierphoto.com).*



# fact file



## Grand Bahama Island



SOURCES: BAHAMAS.COM, CDC.GOV, GEOGRAPHY-SITE.ORG, STATE.TRAVEL.US, MASTERLIVEBOARDS.COM, US CIA WORLD FACTBOOK, WIKIPEDIA.ORG, XE.COM

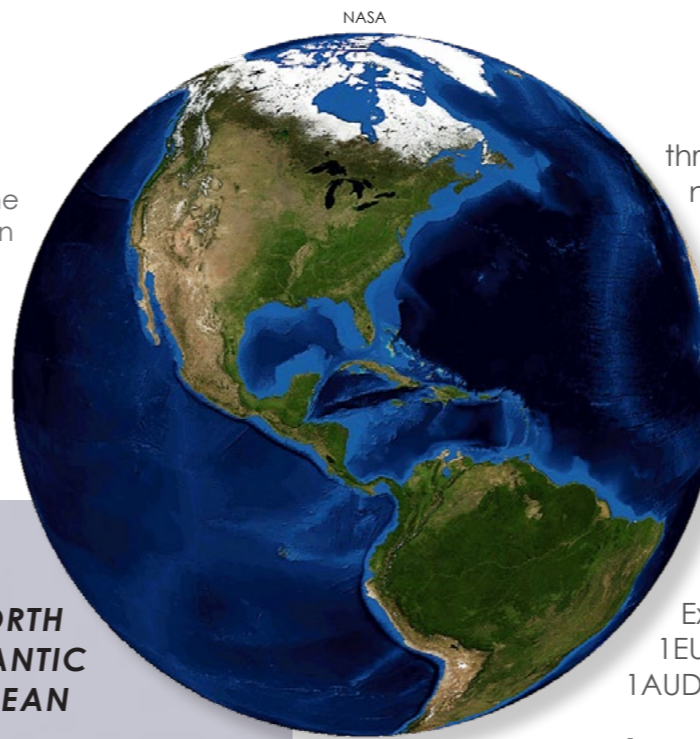
**History** The name Gran Bajamar, meaning "Great Shallows," was given to the island of Grand Bahama by the Spanish. The eventual name of the Bahamas as a whole, is derived from this Spanish name. In 1670, the islands were claimed by Great Britain. Up until the mid-19th century, things were relatively quiet on Grand Bahama Island, which had only around 200 to 400 regular inhabitants in its capital city of West End. The island finally gained a stable source of income in 1955 when a Virginian financier named Wallace Groves, in cooperation with the Bahamian government, began redevelopment and built the city of Freeport under the Hawksbill Creek Agreement, creating the Grand Bahama Port Authority. Government: As a Commonwealth realm, the Bahamas is a parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarchy. Capital: Nassau

**Geography** Grand Bahama Island is around 153km (95mi) long west to east and 24km (15mi) wide north to south at its widest point. It has an area of 1,400 sq km (530 sq mi) and is the closest major island to the United States, lying 90km (56mi) east of the state of Florida. Tiger Beach is situated 26 miles northwest of West End. The shallow sand flat lies east of the Gulf Stream near deep channels and healthy coral reefs. Coastline: The Bahamas has 3,542km of coastline.

**Climate** The Bahamas islands are slightly cooler than other Caribbean island groups due to their proximity to the continental

North American cold air systems. The subtropical climate sees about 340 sunny days per year. Average air temperatures in the winter and spring from December to May are 18-25°C (65-77°F). From June to August in the summer, temperatures range from 24 to 33°C (75-91°F). Average water temperatures in winter are 24°C (75°F) (December to March), in spring, 27°C (80°F), and in summer (June to August), 31°C (88°F). Average water visibility is 24 to 30m (80-100ft). Natural hazards: Recent hurricanes and other tropical storms have caused extensive flooding and wind damage to

Location of the Bahamas Islands on global map (right); Location of Grand Bahama Island on map of the Bahamas (below); Pregnant, female tiger shark (bottom left)



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some of the islands.

### Environment

Challenges include coral reef decay and solid waste disposal.

### Economy

A stable, developing nation, the Bahamas' economy is heavily dependent on tourism and offshore banking. Tourism makes up more than 60% of the GDP and directly or indirectly employs 40% of the archipelago's labor force.

**Population** The Bahamas population is 332,634 (July 2018 est), with the Grand Bahamas Island population of around 51,756 (as of 2010). Ethnic groups: black 90.6%, white 4.7%, black and white 2.1%, other ethnic groups 1.9% (2010 est). Religions: Protestant 69.9%, Roman Catholic 12%, other Christian religions 13% (2010 est.)

**Currency** The Bahamian dollar (BSD) is freely interchanged with the American dollar (USD)

throughout The Bahamas. It is not necessary to change US dollars into Bahamian currency. Traveler's checks in dollar denominations may be cashed almost anywhere. Credit cards are widely accepted. The Bahamas maintain cordial relations with all international banks and is known internationally for its banking and financial services. Exchanges rates: 1USD=1BSD, 1EUR=1.10BSD, 1GBP=1.24BSD, 1AUD=0.68BSD, 1SGD=0.73BSD.

**Language** English is the official language, with Creole spoken among Haitian immigrants.

**Food** Grand Bahama offers a wide variety of international cuisines. The local Bahamian cuisine consists mainly of seafood, poultry or pork, typically fried, steamed, or curried, with various kinds of rice and salads. Meals onboard the liveaboard are served buffet style with multiple options at every sitting.

**Tipping** The usual tip in the Bahamas is similar to the US practice at 15 percent and is often already factored into the check. Be careful not to tip twice. Tipping on the liveaboard is a recommended 10-15% of the cost of your trip.

**Driving** British rules apply, so please drive on the left and watch those roundabouts. Visitors may use their home license for up to three months and may also apply for an international driver's license.

**Voltage** Electricity in the Bahamas is the North American standard 120 volts at 60 cycles. Electrical outlets on the *Bahamas Master* liveaboard have universal plugs.

**Travel/Visa** Daily flights are available from Fort Lauderdale (FLL) and Miami's (MIA) international airports to Grand Bahama International Airport (FPO). A valid passport is required for entry and the expiration date must extend at least six months beyond your departure date.

**Time Zone** Eastern Standard Time prevails on all the islands except during the summer, when Eastern Daylight Savings Time is adopted.

**Health** Check with your doctor for required vaccinations. There is a risk of Hepatitis A through contaminated food or water in the Bahamas (no matter where you are eating or staying), as well as typhoid through contaminated food or water. Yellow fever vaccination is required if are traveling from a country with a risk of yellow fever virus transmission, including transit (of over 12 hours) in an airport located in a country with risk of yellow fever virus transmission.

**Security** Check with your state department for travel advisories and updates, as increased caution regarding violent crime is recommended in Freeport, Grand Bahama, (even during the day and in tourist areas) due to Hurricane Dorian.

**Telephone Code** From North America, dial 1 + 242 + the seven-digit local number. From elsewhere, dial your country's international direct dialing prefix + 1 + 242 + the seven-digit local number.

**Hyperbaric Chamber** The Bahamas Hyperbaric Centre The Lyford Cay Hospital Nassau, Bahamas 24-hour phone: 242 422-2434 Chamber phone: 242 362-5765 ■

